

Labour movement

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Illustration by Bell Mellor



The joys and drawbacks of being able to work from anywhere

THREE years ago Pip Coburn left his job as an analyst at UBS, a global bank, in order to start his own investment consultancy, Coburn Ventures. At his first staff meeting, in a Manhattan café, he and his five colleagues drew up their to-do list. The most urgent item, everybody agreed, was to get BlackBerries. Then they needed to start contacting clients. And at some point they should probably find some office space, ideally in the chic area around New York's Union Square.

Within three days they had their BlackBerries and were pitching their offerings to fund managers. That went well and kept everybody busy. All six were roaming around the city and country, working from wherever they pleased and meeting clients either virtually—via e-mail, phone or instant messaging—or physically wherever the clients preferred. “No client ever even asked me whether we had an office,” says Mr Coburn, “so the office space never rose to the top of the agenda.”

Eight months later, with seven employees now, Mr Coburn brought up the issue again, at another breakfast meeting in a café. He asked if anybody still wanted an office at all. One thirtysomething woman, with two kids and a nanny at home, felt that she might like a quiet office as an option. But the others—all in their 30s except for two fortysomethings, including Mr Coburn—were now against it. “We had learned to love the freedom and autonomy,” says Mr Coburn. So Coburn Ventures remains a “virtual firm”.

That changes the way its employees live. While at UBS, Mr Coburn got up at precisely 5.08am on weekdays in order to catch a commuter train into Manhattan that would allow him to be at his cubicle by 6.45 and in a conference room at 7.00. “I never saw my kids in the morning,” he recalls. Now he wakes up at 6.15, does half an hour of yoga, kisses his three children and then turns on his BlackBerry. Usually he works at home or in cafés with Wi-Fi in his suburb of Westchester. When he goes into Manhattan, it is for specific meetings and at off-peak times. He also works from his second home in Maine and uses the five-hour drive for “wonderful, free conversations” on his earpiece.

Nomadism works, he says, because everybody on his team is “conscientious and self-motivated”. But it

did take some adjusting. At first the team's communications became more "transactional"—efficient but impersonal. Once a terse e-mail led to an awkward misunderstanding. And without the proverbial water cooler, there was "no space for casual serendipity", says Mr Coburn. But these drawbacks were easy to fix. His team now gets together regularly for fun, as if they were a clique of college friends. The group has become closer than any he has ever been part of, says Mr Coburn, and everybody has a "deeper connection to the organisation".

James Ware, a co-founder of the Work Design Collaborative, a small think-tank, says that nomadic work styles are fast becoming the norm for "knowledge workers". His research shows that in America such people spend less than a third of their working time in traditional corporate offices, about a third in their home offices and the remaining third working from "third places" such as cafés, public libraries or parks. And it is not only the young and digitally savvy. At 64, Mr Ware considers himself a nomad, and accesses the files on his home computer from wherever he happens to be.

Today's work nomadism descends from, but otherwise bears little resemblance to, the older model of "telecommuting", says Mr Ware. That earlier concept became popular in the 1990s thanks to cheap but stationary telecommunications technologies—the landline phone, the fax and dial-up internet. Because it still tied workers to a place—the home office—telecommuting implicitly had people "cocooning at home five days a week", he says. But people do not want that: instead, they want to mingle with others and to collaborate, though not necessarily under fluorescent lights in a cubicle farm an hour's drive from their homes. The crucial difference between telecommuting and nomadism, he says, is that nomadism combines the autonomy of telecommuting with the mobility that allows a gregarious and flexible work style.

This new model of nomadic work has become technologically feasible only very recently. Mike Lazaridis, the founder of Research In Motion and inventor of the BlackBerry, the firm's main product, says that his device "freed you from your desk" just when globalisation seemed to require many office workers to put in 24 hours, seven days a week. "The BlackBerry didn't cause globalisation, but it helps you manage the reality of it. We wanted you to have a life," he says.

Wi-Fi hotspots have been equally crucial, as have many relatively obscure innovations, such as IMAP, the "internet message access protocol". It synchronises e-mail across mobile phones, computers and web mail so that the user encounters the same in-box no matter which device he uses. PDF, the "portable-document format", became a universal standard for producing, sharing and archiving anything that used to require paper. "Cloud computing" increasingly lets people keep their documents online rather than on one particular computer.

Office politics

With the old technological hassles thus mostly conquered, the new questions tend to be sociological. Wes Boyd has worked nomadically for the entire decade since he co-founded MoveOn.org, a leftish organisation for political activism in America, and attributes his "great family life" to this style of work. But as MoveOn.org grew to about 20 staff, thousands of consultants and millions of volunteers, he also realised that "there can't be any clumps of people in physical offices" because they might turn into cliques or "power centres". In an effective organisation, "there mustn't be insiders and outsiders," he says. So he made it a rule that no two people anywhere may share a physical office.

Instead, all of his colleagues are "virtually co-present" throughout the day, says Mr Boyd, pointing to the instant-messaging "buddy list" on his computer screen, which shows who is available and who would rather not be disturbed. Instead of wasting time in pointless physical meetings, he gets most issues resolved with constant and quick electronic communications, arranged ad hoc rather than scheduled in advance. As a result his staff are more "purpose-driven" and less obsessed with relationships, which improves the quality of their work, he says.

Conflicts arise only when both models, the old culture and the new, collide or overlap, he says. This usually happens in Washington, DC, where Mr Boyd has a lot of business. In the government bureaucracies he visits, workers still have assistants who "structure their time" so that it can take a week to arrange a meeting to resolve a mundane detail. Yet these same workers are now also expected to do

“ad-hoc flexible scheduling”, which tears them apart. “In physical meetings, they are the ones looking at their BlackBerries under the table,” says Mr Boyd.

Larger organisations often do not have the option of dispensing with offices entirely, as Coburn Ventures and MoveOn did. So they need to manage a mixed system of work cultures. At Sun Microsystems, a company that makes hardware and software for corporate datacentres, more than half of the workforce is now officially nomadic, as part of a programme called “open work” in which employees have no dedicated desk but work from any that is available (called “hotdesking”), or do not come into the office at all.

That has not, however, created the coterries that Mr Boyd fears. “It’s naive to think that the physical infrastructure has anything to do with power,” says Jonathan Schwartz, Sun’s chief executive. His experience with nomadism is entirely positive. Sun’s workers love the flexibility, stay with the firm longer and are more productive.

Mr Schwartz himself leads by example. He usually carries only his BlackBerry and works from “anywhere that has Wi-Fi”. He has an assistant who manages his diary (“she recently put her foot down and has forbidden me to modify what she puts in”) so that “150% of my time is structured.” The difference is that he now rarely sees her, and that the venues for his scheduled meetings are flexible. He conducts many on Skype, a free internet-telephone service, or in person at cafés. “Time provides the structure, location takes care of itself,” he says. He is now planning to get rid of his physical office entirely; Sun’s top lawyer has already done so.

Mr Schwartz, like Messrs Boyd and Coburn, has also noticed that he is having fewer “flesh meetings”. This runs counter to the conventional wisdom of the past few decades, which held that improvements in telecommunications always lead to more physical travel, rather than less. Mr Schwartz used to spend two weeks a month travelling to meet customers; that has come down to less than one week a month. With more than 100,000 customers, he finds that he communicates far more efficiently through his [blog](#), which is translated into ten languages and “on a good day reaches 50,000 people.” When he travels, it is now largely for cultural reasons—his Asian customers, in particular, still find physical meetings reassuring. But in general he finds that “face-to-face is overrated; I care more about the frequency and fidelity of the communication.”

Still, nomadic work requires other big adjustments in the culture of an organisation and the behaviour of its individuals, says Mr Ware of the Work Design Collaborative. He finds that older and more traditional supervisors usually oppose the idea because they fear that they cannot manage people whom they cannot see. With time, they usually change their minds, says Mr Ware; but this requires “management by objectives rather than face time”. Not all workers thrive in such a culture; some prefer the structure of the traditional office. But “anyone who did well at college can work well this way,” he thinks. “The prof said ‘paper by Friday’ but didn’t care where you did it; it’s the same now.”

Death of a road warrior

The bigger problem is stress. Nomadic work means more autonomy, but “anybody who works for himself has a tyrant as a boss,” says Paul Saffo, the Silicon Valley trend-watcher. “The danger is that the anytime, anyplace office will lure us into the tiger cage that is the everytime, everyplace office.” BlackBerries and their kin have already caused marital problems for many couples, who must negotiate whether the gadget is allowed, say, in the bedroom or on the beach while on holiday. Severe addicts pretend to go to the lavatory at home just to check their e-mail. An office worker’s day used to stop when he left the office. When does a nomad’s working day stop?

James Katz, a professor at Rutgers University who leads a research centre on the sociology of mobile technologies, says that the shift amounts to a “historical re-integration” of our productive and social spheres. In the hunter-gatherer, agricultural and pre-industrial artisan eras people did not separate the physical space devoted to work, family and play. Blacksmiths, say, worked from their homes, with family and village life all around. It was only with the capital-intensive

Illustration by Bell Mellor



work of the industrial era that a separation of homes and factories became necessary, because workers "had to be co-located" in order to work efficiently. This also applied to bureaucracies before the digital era. Now, however, the different spheres of life are merging again.

This leads to more pressure, says Mr Katz. The difference between the integration of work and family in pre-industrial times and today is that in the old days there were clear limits on personal productivity and now there are not. Today "people judge what they should achieve by what they could achieve," says Mr Katz, and with our new technologies we can always theoretically achieve more. People thus "feel inadequate compared with the enormous opportunity they have".

The optimists counter that all it takes is a bit of self-discipline and perspective to overcome that anxiety. Mr Ware advises his clients to draw clear boundaries of etiquette. He has an agreement with his own business partner in another time zone that they not bother each other out of hours. Sun's Mr Schwartz has an iron rule that he spends two hours after work "rolling around on the floor" with his two sons before returning to his gadgets. Mr Coburn admits that work and family are "all one big blur" but likes it that way. Mr Saffo and his wife ban all gadgets during dinner by candlelight.

Almost all the sociologists and psychologists in academia, however, take a more pessimistic view. Sherry Turkle, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) who studies the psychology of gadget use, believes that the addicts, often called "CrackBerries", are "watching their lives on that little screen and can't keep up with it", leaving them permanently anxious.

Rutgers' Mr Katz argues that the "frenzy is only going to get worse." This is, first, because of "random reinforcement", the desultory pattern of rewards that comes with addictive behaviours such as gambling. A CrackBerry winnows through his e-mail throughout the day, knowing full well that most of it is chaff, but cannot help himself because of that occasional grain. The second reason, says Mr Katz, is that most people suffer from the illusion that more information always leads to better decisions, and there is always more information available on our phones and laptops. The third reason is that "people today need to do constant impression-management," because the mere ability to stay connected during weekends, vacations or sabbaticals means that going offline risks reminding others that we are expendable.

The flexibility, freedom and productivity of mobile work thus have a cost. Nomads are constantly juggling the social rights of colleagues, relatives and friends, as well as their own right to downtime. All of this, moreover, now tends to happen in public places that were not built specifically for work, in the way offices were. The next article looks at how that affects those kinds of places.

